

The following essay (written in 2004) and hundreds of others by volunteers and staff who worked with the United Farm Workers (under Cesar Chavez) during the 1960s and 1970s may be found at:

www.farmworkermovement.org

Marc Sapir (1973-1978)

Introduction

I began working with the UFW one afternoon a week as a volunteer doc in the new Salinas clinic in a 2 bedroom house at 1047 East Alisal. It was April, 1973. Two years later, facing a crisis in my life I offered to join the National Farm Workers' Health Group (NFWHG) clinic staff full time. I remained on staff with the Union for 3 and a half years, until October 5, 1978. At the end I think I was the only practicing physician left from a remarkably dedicated group that had once staffed 5 NFWHG clinics and, overall, may have numbered (including part timers) as many as 25-30 up through 1978. Among clinic volunteers an even larger group was, or went on to become nurse practitioners, physicians assistants, physicians, and health para-professionals. The UFW paid for the medical training of at least one dedicated UFW volunteer (Marion Moses') but by the time she finished her training the 5 clinics had been closed and Marion's area of expertise and interest (farm workers' pesticide exposure and other work related problems) could not be incorporated within the larger clinical program.

All memory is selective. Some parts of this essay are based upon available documents, but others are just my recollections. Like most the volunteers with the UFW, I have both enriching and troubled memories of those times. In preparing this piece I read through the excellent pieces of Gilbert Padilla, Dan Murphy, Margaret Murphy, and Kathy Murguia before I started.¹ When I wrote Leroy Chatfield to ask if I might still post a piece he asked if I would include any thoughts on why the clinics closed. I will.

Anyone who reads the posted essays will gain a good background on the movement. And thanks to Leroy for all the hard work that went into creating the project.

How I got Involved

In early 1973 Margaret Murphy heard of me and called at home and I agreed to work an afternoon a week at the new Salinas Clinic of the UFW. I was just a year and a half out of training, having resigned from an Obstetrics and Gynecology residency in late 1971. I was now a general practitioner working only part time for Santa Clara County in their teen clinics. My wife, Sheila Thorne, and I were strong supporters of the Union and la causa by then. We had

¹ The night before final editing this I discovered the e-list dialogue that went on from May-December 2004 and I read through the first month and a half of that. I do have thoughts and comments based upon those often informative and revealing, but sometimes too spontaneous, remarks. I will not incorporate those thoughts into this piece but I will send some comments to Leroy.

recently moved to East San Jose, in fact to the Latino barrio, “sal si puede” (not to be confused with “si se puede”), where the CSO (the Community Service Organization) had its office. I think Cesar had cut his organizing teeth with the CSO. He had left San Jose to form the UFW a decade before we arrived. Sheila and I had been to UFW support events and so were generally known among people Margaret would have asked for medical contacts.

In July, 1973, a few months after I began volunteering in the Salinas clinic, Sheila and I drove south to support the grape strike around Arvin and Lamont, California. The growers were feeling the workers’ pressure and had signed sweetheart contracts with the Teamsters Union who now claimed to represent the workers on the ranches. The Teamsters brought goons to the fields and UFW picket lines to intimidate the workers and attack organizers and strikers.

At a park where the strikers and their supporters were rallying and organizing we heard Cesar speak. We witnessed his charisma, the sincerity and humility in the way he listened to small groups of farm workers here and there trying to hear directly from them their concerns about the ranches they worked on, how the strike should be organized. Already in our 30s with activist backgrounds we weren’t prone to hero worship, but we could see what an amazing effective and coherent leader Cesar was.

Sometime during that first week on the strike lines my family got word to me that my father had died unexpectedly while on a trip to Europe with my mother. I left Sheila and flew back to New York for the funeral. When I returned to Northern California, I learned that Sheila was in jail in Bakersfield with a group of farm worker women, some badly treated by goons and police. After she was released—unharméd--and returned to San Jose, we formed a small farm worker support-committee with friends, did some picketing and leafleting and got Gallo Wines removed from the Pink Elephant Liquor store on King Road (a block from our home) and from several other stores in East San Jose. Later we launched a successful effort to get scab grapes removed from the Alum Rock School District’s lunch menu. We thought the District’s ignoring the grape boycott to be of particular importance because the vast majority of students in the Alum Rock District, then attended by our children, were Mexican-Americans.

In April of 1975, external events too complex to describe here intruded into our personal lives and I decided to leave San Jose. Sheila and I split up and I joined the NFWHG medical staff full-time. It was a timely decision because Dan Murphy was already working alone at the Rodrigo Terronez clinic at Forty Acres in Delano, the other 3 docs having left. I was assigned by the UFW to the Delano Clinic and I moved immediately with my German Shepherd. In this era I first had a 1959 baby blue Ford Galaxie 500 convertible purchased for a few hundred dollars. This car was to be replaced by selling my Honda 450 motorcycle and finding a used Chevy Nova (a white box), with a 327 cu. inch engine and a racing clutch, after the Galaxie blew its engine on the road just outside UFW Headquarters in La Paz on my first visit there.

In agreeing to work for the Union I was, thankfully, offered an apartment in the Agbayani village at Forty Acres, about 50 yards walk from the clinic. There I lived alongside the retired mostly Philippino male farm workers who were wonderful company for this suddenly bachelored 34 year-old Anglo-with-large-dog. I heard their stories and learned how the “village” was designed and built from Chris Braga. He was the young LA activist who had spearheaded the

effort for the UFW. I also became friends with Phillip De La Cruz, the Philippino member and Vice President of the UFW Board of Directors.

Delano Clinic

Dan Murphy's informative essay provides many details about the services of the Terronez clinic. Dan, a few years older than me, was my mentor in medicine, and a good friend; he far outstripped me in basketball skills as well. He had a great outside jumpshot and was ferocious under the boards (even at 6'3"). Dan was the main man in the Clinic in the best sense of the word. I can add little to his description of the clinic function. But I'll relate a few vignettes.

I remember the oppressive heat of the Central Valley that summer. Someone raised in cooler climates could seriously begin to appreciate what farm worker life in the fields might be like in the heat of that summer. On a given day it might be freezing cold or broiling hot in the early pre-dawn hours, but always over 100 degrees in mid-afternoon. One night the lowest temperature overnight outdoors was 99 degrees (God knows what it was inside). Sleepless, around midnight I dragged a mat or sleeping bag to use as a cushion onto the grass in front of the clinic and lay down next to a small row of artichoke plants in bloom. There was a full moon and I could see everything at Forty Acres clearly. I slept, at best fitfully, in the heat, knowing a hard day's work lay ahead in the clinic. The next day I called Sheila in San Jose and asked if I could bring down our only window air conditioner to put in my room. By then, only 3 months since I had moved, we were visiting each other back and forth (and we would soon be back together for good—a reunion that has lasted 30 years). I told her I could pick up the cooler on my weekend visit (Dan and I rotated weekends on-call). Sheila agreed.

My 7 months with Murphy were like a three-year Family Practice residency in quick time. I learned Spanish on the job. When I asked Dan for a translator my first day he said, "we can't afford staff for that. You'll learn faster without it." (In truth I did have some rudimentary Spanish from working in the Salinas clinic, and I was able to learn fast enough). Dan's essay is accurate in that there was no medical challenge that we would not accept. If he thought he was in over his head and the extensive clinic library could not clear the muddy water for a diagnosis and treatment plan, Dan had his marvelous stable of academic experts to call on the phone or to ask to see our sickest and most complicated patients. I remember a young recent immigrant farm worker about 19 who came in with a sore throat. But just looking you could see it wasn't merely a sore throat. He had a white necrotic mass back there. We got him to the right people at UCLA or USC within a day. He was rapidly diagnosed with a malignant lymphoma and begun on a radiation and chemotherapy regimen. This unfortunate young man died within a month, but I knew that he had gotten the best care that the U.S. could offer for his aggressive disease in 1975.

It was from Dan that I learned that taking up such challenges and staying in the middle of the total health care process is the best way to assure good, comprehensive care with continuity and support for the patient. You learn, you teach, you motivate and are motivated to be exceptional. This experience served me well later in my career when I became the Medical Director of the Center for Elders' Independence in Oakland, a position I retired from in 2001 after 9 plus years. CEI is part of the Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) keeping frail elders in the community to the end of life. It is based upon the same "si se puede" ethic as the UFW and

the philosophy of integrating a collectivized culture of professional caring and curing into the culture of the community being served; breaking down the barriers.

By summer of 1975 Dan Murphy and his wife decided to take their first vacation in many years and leave the clinic to me and his able Murphy-trained staff of barefoot doctors and nurses. All went well except for that week's baby production. I think there were 8 or 10, but every one of those kids decided to come in the middle of the night. Maybe these ninos knew I was alone and were trying to make sure they didn't take away from clinic hours for farm workers, but by the time Dan returned I had spent several sleepless nights and was pretty frazzled. By then we had moved the deliveries out of the clinic and into the Delano Community Hospital.

Before Dan went on vacation we had had a situation regarding the deliveries in the clinic that worried me. There were two lying-in beds for 24 hour care at the clinic. If we had people who needed overnight intravenous fluids or other care that could be achieved without hospitalization we would do it. But those beds were also the beds where women, post-partum, stayed with their babies until they were stable enough to go home.

One day we ended up with a woman and her infant in one bed and a patient with a rather florid gastroenteritis (a bacterial diarrhea) in the other bed. I thought this was a serious problem, and that it would be best if we categorically reserved the beds for sick people and moved the deliveries to the Community Hospital. Dan's response was that we needed to avoid the pitfalls of hospital admission and the serious problems within the U.S. health care system that farm workers faced--from language barriers to racism to financial issues. Although this argument had traction with me also, I thought safety was of greater concern at that moment. But I wasn't making the decisions.

Despite my great respect for Dan, I decided to go over his head. I may have talked with someone else first, but I ended up talking with Cesar. I told him my concerns, and suggested that we move the deliveries to hospital. Cesar heard me out, took my concerns very seriously and he asked Dan to change the clinic policy. I was, of course, again impressed that Cesar was willing to hear me and pleased that he took what I said seriously. I knew how much Dan respected Cesar and I was sure there would be no bitterness on Dan's part if Cesar thought that there was a danger to the UFW, the clinic, and farm workers should an infection spread to a newborn or mother. There was none.

There were a couple of other obstetrical dramas that stand out in my mind. Among other things, they showed how Dan stayed focused and undaunted in a crisis. Before we stopped doing deliveries at Forty Acres, one day we had a delivery during clinic hours where the baby was born in terrible condition. Dan attended the delivery and I was there assisting him. I think Murphy made some limited attempt at resuscitation but I could see he wasn't seriously into it, which wasn't like him. In a short while it was clear the baby was not going to breathe with or without help and he allowed it to die peacefully. After consoling the mother Dan and I sat down across the hall and he pulled out a book from the expansive library. "That's what I thought it was," he said to me. "Potter's syndrome. This baby has no functioning kidneys and underdeveloped lungs. He was doomed. He wasn't going to breath and there was no chance of survival."

“How did you know he had that?” I asked. “It was the chin and face”, he responded. “Go back and look at the face and you’ll see he has no chin, a beaked nose. I noticed it when I tried to intubate him. The features are a telltale sign.” “Were you sure?” I asked him. “Hell know,” he responded. “I was anxious and sweating bullets that we might have an unexplained neonatal death on our hands, but at the same time I was **almost** positive I had it right.” It was this balance between self-examination and honesty on the one hand and a determination to learn and to go all out to assure the best for the patients, the farm workers, and the UFW that I admired most in Murphy.

Another time I was on call at the clinic and a woman came in around midnight, in labor. She had had many children before which can sometimes cause post partum problems. The delivery was quick and routine around 2:30 or 3 a.m., but afterward as I waited and waited and waited---well over 15 minutes--the placenta did not separate and the woman began to bleed. She wasn’t bleeding heavily but I was a bit anxious and tried to coax the process by pulling on the cord. Though I was experienced in this and knew not to pull hard, but gradually and gently, I obviously pulled too hard for along with the placenta the uterus turned inside out (inverted). Though the woman had not lost a lot of blood, the inversion caused her blood pressure to fall dramatically. I put in a second IV line, turned both lines wide open, broke into a sweat, and rushed across the hall to a phone and woke up Murphy. “What do I do?” “I think you just push it right back with your gloved hand,” he said. “But I’m sure it’s there in the book. Look it up in the OB book.”

Oh my God I thought, is there time for this? But as I was hanging up the phone there was a loud pounding on the back door, no more than 20 feet from where I was. I ran to open the door and in walked a traveling Obstetrician-Gynecologist friend of Dan’s and the Union’s who had serendipitously showed up in town and had been out jogging in the middle of the night (hard to believe). It took only a minute to tell him the situation and he confirmed Dan’s advice. “Nothing to it”, he said. “It’s happened to me and others. I’ll watch over your shoulder for moral support while you do it. Just put on a sterile glove, make a fist and you’ll push it back into place.” I did and the woman did well.

The parents of one of the babies I delivered while Dan was away bestowed the greatest of honors on me, asking if I would be the baby’s Godfather in a Church ceremony. I couldn’t say no, but I asked them if it mattered to the Church that I was Jewish. No it didn’t. I worried whether I deserved this honor, knowing that I could easily disappear from their lives even before the child would have any relationship with me. But I accepted nonetheless. At times I dwell on the thought that I betrayed their trust in losing track of them when I left Delano only a few months later. And I wonder what happened to that child, who now would be 30 years old. But I also believed they just wanted to give thanks and were proud to be able to offer this honor to a Union doctor.

Moving On from Delano

By the end of summer it was quite clear that Sheila and I were not going to stay apart long and since she was committed to continuing her work as a political and union organizer (UE) in a Silicon Valley electronics firm (National Semi-Conductor) I would be moving back to San Jose.

I told the Union and Dan that I wanted to stay with the UFW full time but that I would need to transfer to the Salinas clinic. I imagine the leaders, from Dan and Esther Uranday at the clinic to Margaret Murphy and others at Delano and La Paz, were disappointed with this decision. They needed support for Murphy in Delano. But somehow they would find someone else and, deciding that half a loaf is better than none, they agreed.

But soon there was a trade-off. Dr. John Radebaugh, a board certified pediatrician, who manned the UFW clinic in Sanger (near Fresno) had become demoralized by the siphoning off of clinic staff for other Union roles and by direct Union leadership interference in clinic function. The clinic had become chaotic. John made the inappropriate move (to my mind) of publishing a broad critique of UFW leadership dysfunction in the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM). I didn't understand John's action. Although I knew that many of his criticisms deserved consideration, why he thought publishing internal union problems in a prestigious national medical journal could help the UFW or farm workers was beyond me. If he wasn't going to bring his issues to some forum within the UFW, John could have just resigned. Dr. Joe Goldenson and I submitted a response to John to the NEJM. The UFW was having so much trouble recruiting physicians that we needed to let doctors know that the positives of providing health care within the farm workers' struggle clearly outweighed the difficulties. And their help was needed and would be welcomed with heartfelt gratitude.

Years later, back in San Jose, John and I became colleagues when he was faculty with the San Jose Hospital Family Practice Residency. He worked occasionally as a fill-in for our pediatrician at the Gardner Community Health Center in the Sacred Heart Church in the Latino community when I was medical director there. One day John saved the life of a baby whose heart stopped right in the clinic.

Though the Union had no way to replace John, leadership decided to fire him immediately. I was asked by Kathy Murguia to keep the Sanger clinic open. I agreed to drive down from San Jose and work 2 days a week there (with the other 3 days a week in Salinas) but for a limited time only (2-3 months). The Sanger clinic was not doing hospital care like Delano. I knew I couldn't sustain that clinic for very long with a 4 hour drive each way (in comparison my daily drive from San Jose to Salinas was only 1 hour). But at least I could give the Union time to recruit a replacement for John and, if not that, to decide on an alternative plan (closing was not the only option because, for one example, Fresno General Hospital had physician residency training programs and might be induced to take over the clinic; for another there were non-profit clinics in the area that might have agreed to take over the patient load if enough patients were insured by the UFW RFK plan; for a third, recruiting a graduating resident from somewhere to begin in July, 1976 was always a possibility).

Working in Sanger I gained a farm worker family of lifelong friends (the Santos family) in Reedley where I would stay overnight weekly. Aurelio Santos, who now runs the Reedley Social Services program that provides legal assistance to many farm workers was a volunteer in the Sanger clinic. But faced with its many other problems and priorities the UFW did not find a way to keep the clinic open during that time and the Sanger clinic closed later in 1976 after I left.

When I decided to work full time with the UFW I had no financial reserves. Sheila's job in an Electronics plant was paying something more than minimum wage. If I were to make farm worker Union health care my life's work—which was my intent by the time I left Delano—I thought we needed some minimum income from the work. The vast nationwide boycott movement and the UFW volunteer staff had been recruited around the same moral imperatives as the civil rights movement. People acted/participated because of their belief in “la causa”. There were few material benefits, just the joy of working together for what we believed in, and the cultural sustenance of joining the farm worker community. To change that, to create material incentives as the basis for employment with the UFW could have weakened the movement and, besides, the UFW had little money to spare. I knew these things, but I also knew that there was a big difference between recruiting idealistic youths to join the farm workers' movement for two years--or Catholic liberation theologians seeking to re-dedicate their lives to their calling through the UFW--and lawyers and doctors, often with big debts, who were being asked to forgo the incomes available to them as career professionals. The Union agreed to pay me \$600 a month, plus \$50 per child (by now there were 3) for a total of \$750 per month.

I know that others also received such stipends. However, the idea of getting paid some basic wage never became part of physician/ nurse recruitment efforts, so far as I know. I recall having discussions with Union people (like Kathy Murguia) in which I argued that some basic stipend was necessary if we were going to recruit enough medical professionals to make the NFWHG clinics a permanent institution that could grow and prosper for the farm workers. Although I don't remember if I had any opinion on the legal staff asking to raise their income to 900 or 1000 dollars, I do remember that I thought all permanent staff of the Union could only be retained if there was some salary. For me personally, even the small sum of \$750 a month made it easier to be able to stay with the UFW indefinitely, barring unforeseen events.

However, unforeseen events did indeed occur. On Sanger: the closing of the Sanger clinic revealed that the UFW was having trouble recruiting new physicians. However, this recruitment problem was not the ultimate cause of the closing of the other clinics. The maelstrom that ended the NFWHG swirled around larger events.

The Political and the Personal always Tend to Merge

In Kathy Murguia's essay she reveals she lost her twins, born premature at 28 weeks while living under stressful conditions in the auditorium of Father Boyle's Sacred Heart Church in San Francisco. (Coincidentally, twenty five years later my own daughter would be a teacher in the Sacred Heart's School. And ten years after that, around 2004, I would read that Sacred Heart Church was being torn down). Years after losing her twins, now with a flock of healthy children, Kathy and her husband Lupe were assigned to the Cleveland boycott, only to be relocated to Detroit that same year. This, she writes, took a toll on her children and she realized that she had to protect herself and her family's needs because no one else would do it for her.

I doubt that there has ever been a political movement with great ideals and goals that did not demand everything from its adherents and in the process unintentionally damage many of those adherents. Belief is the mother of motivators and can easily override our attention to personal needs and details. But beyond altruism there is also much left unspoken in this paradigm. There

is also the asceticism of monks meditating and hibernating in catacombs until death, the self-flagellation of extreme believers. The damage we can do ourselves to prove our worthiness is not always unintentional; sometimes it seems like a purification.

I think Kathy was in charge of the NFWHG during much of my UFW service and she was open minded, supportive and did a great job. She went through this battle within herself, remaining in the heart and heat of the struggle for many years. I can imagine the tendency of people close to the heart of the movement feeling that putting personal needs on a par with those of la causa would be a betrayal of the farm workers and their fight. Kathy was there in La Paz when I joined up and she was there when I left in 1978. Sometime in the late 1990s I received a call from Kathy's son who had learned about the inner Union turmoil of the earlier period when he was a child. He wanted to know my views and experiences regarding things that happened. He had met one of my daughters and in comparing parents backgrounds they serendipitously realized they had UFW experience in common.

I know that depersonalizing events can lead to a sterile reportage, sterile ideological arguments, and an ignoring of important realities. On the other hand, discussing the personal aspect of political events in purely individual and personal ways can also distort reality, change the meaning, dilute what might be a more coherent and vivid word picture. The personal perspective presented alone can dull the intellectual sense each of us might want to bring to the process of recollection. Larger mistakes of the past that we pass over without notation and discussion are likely to be repeated over and over again.

Was the reluctance of many to discuss UFW controversies a result of loyalty to Cesar's memory and courage? Or something else? I wouldn't know. In any event, it seems to me that many leaders of that period are still holding back from a productive analysis of the general crisis within the Union that began somewhere around 1974-6. That crisis culminated in the purging of a significant proportion of the volunteers on staff in the UFW and closing of all the clinics. I believe it also coincided with a declination in contracts and the weakening of much of the national support movement (by the 1980s). Some have suggested the crisis around the loss of Proposition 14 was the root problem (In 1975 I was working so hard in the Delano Clinic that I really had almost nothing to do with that monumental event in UFW history). Some have raised the specter of COINTELPRO as the gorilla hidden in this closet. Perhaps. Others write of the coming of reactionary times as Ronald Reagan became president and as the ALRB faltered and fewer elections were protected and upheld. But truth be told, it will take the frank and open assessments of many people from within the UFW's center to ever usefully understand these problems and processes. I was too far out on the periphery to contribute much.

Some Particulars that Can be Evaluated

However, Margaret Murphy's essay reveals in a subtle and sensitive fashion a number of the little things that would later summate into crises. She mentions Cesar's firmly held opposition to the clinics giving out birth control. She points out that pressed by the needs of farm worker women, the clinics handled the issue on an individual basis taking their lead from the workers. That is both true and a gentle way of saying that we tried to do what was right for the workers without getting into a big policy debate with Cesar, an argument we, as volunteers, and non-farm

workers, could not win. However, Margaret's remark is only 4/5 true. Somewhere in 1976 Cesar got very inflamed when he heard that various types of birth control were still being given out at clinics and he issued an edict from the President. I recall a confrontation with the Coachella clinic staff. My recollection is that the staff decided to openly defy Cesar and wrote that in a public document or a letter to Cesar himself.

As in the case of John Radebaugh, I thought this a reckless move. All the clinics were following the non-policy (non-defiance) approach in the way that Margaret discusses in her essay; trying to be for the farm workers without going against Cesar. What we had to do was avoid a challenge to Cesar's leadership. That could come to no good end. In Salinas we never stopped giving out birth control which farm workers wanted and needed, but we also never had a confrontation with Cesar over this. In the end I believe that the birth control conflict was the proximate cause of the second clinic shutdown, at Coachella. But I doubt that it was the fundamental cause.

Margaret, almost in passing, mentions the names of two people who were brought in to La Paz around 1976 to implement a process of transforming the UFW to "business" trade unionism. This was one of the stories of a coming disaster foretold. Cesar himself had forged the idea in the 60s of merging the Phillipino Union and the National Farm Workers Union under the banner of a political and cultural "movement" of and for farm workers rights. La Causa, La Raza, these were social, cultural calls that drew into the fight hundreds of thousands of farm workers and their supporters. The AFL-CIO could never have achieved the successes of the UFW using old fashion economic trade unionism, ignoring problems beyond wages and working conditions. The UFW was addressing housing, poverty, health care, ethnic and national discrimination, and the culture of the Mexicanos, Philipinos, and other groups ground into the rich earth of California by indifferent millionaire farmers, Agribusiness and the larger political system. It was clearly a political movement for farm worker rights, not just a trade union. Yet by the late 70s the AFL had much influence within the core (not only with Cesar).

The ideology of the "movement" Cesar had spawned could not withstand a contradiction with the AFL's conception of how to solve poor union management techniques. After all, poor management was a problem. Someone might write an entire book about how George Meany and the AFL (and the California Democratic Party) gained such a high level of influence within the UFW. Perhaps such a book would start from the moment Meany provided vast AFL-CIO financial resources for the strikes and boycotts and then demanded that Cesar shut down articles critical of U.S. foreign policy in *El Malcriado*, the Union paper, as an absolute precondition for continuing to receive the strike funding. He had Cesar and the UFW cornered. I'm not the person to write that book, but I do remember a disheartened and highly reliable *El Malcriado* editor telling me, when I visited La Paz early in my service, that the paper, a great rallying cry for both the farm workers and the support movement, would be closed and why.²

² Just before final editing I noted a comment in the May, 2004 internet dialogue insinuating that *El Malcriado* was a nest of anti-Union activity--that some on the *Malcriado* staff had destroyed many rolls of Cesar's film. I think that such accusations, offered without any evidence, should not be tolerated by those who care about the UFW for they may be used to mask the misdeeds of others. If films did disappear, those entrusted with them need to be asked explain what happened rather than stand accused, unnamed and in absentia, of nefarious motives.

Later on in her essay Margaret relates hearing of the Synanon game (a method of extreme group confrontation and psychological pressure, including berating, designed to get drug addicts to become and stay clean and sober) being brought into the Union. “The game” was instituted at La Paz in 1976 and Margaret heard (I think from Tasha Donner) that it was becoming required of Union Staff as a fixed institution. She pondered this and realized that sooner or later Clinic staff would be required to play the “game”. This absurdity confirmed the rationale of her already made decision to leave the UFW.

The Salinas Clinica (1976-1978)

There was, by chance, good timing in my moving from Salinas to Delano and then back to Salinas (3 days a week with 2 days a week in Sanger). I could not go back to Salinas full time immediately because they then had more staff than examination rooms (2) in their small clinic. However, a doctor was leaving and it would only be a few months before I would be needed to fill that gap. Perfect. However, somewhere in that period another doctor arrived in Salinas from Detroit. Is Kolman had retired from Urology with the UAW hospital in Detroit and wanted to contribute to the UFW efforts. Is had a hand tremor that made writing difficult and so he would type his notes on an ancient portable typewriter he kept on a small desk in one exam room. It was a great luxury for me to have an experienced urologist in the next room to consult with. I wasn't reluctant to consult Is, who, last I knew, was still alive (and about 90 years old) living here in Berkeley where Sheila and I settled in the mid-80s.

In a short while, as Margaret notes, the Salinas clinic had an influx of energetic new staff (Randy, Jane, Wren and others—volunteers, medical students, PA and NP students, etc), some with enough experience to take on practitioner roles under guidance. But we were living in a sardine can. The small house with two bedrooms could not accommodate the need to serve more farm workers nor the luxury of having a growing staff. The Union decided to embark upon a renovation that would add exam rooms and extend the kitchen to make a “real” laboratory. This project was accomplished on a shoestring budget with volunteers coming down from the Bay Area and around Monterrey County. My older stepson, Shep, then 17 years old, came down on a weekly basis to work on the construction crew. He spent the following summer working at La Paz, later going on to the California Conservation Corp and ultimately becoming a firefighter. The energy and enthusiasm of the crew on this project was typical of the “si se puede” culture around the movement in those days, but the renovation also led to an unfortunate conflict.

As important as the renovation was, it was stopgap. The longer range plan was to build a new Union clinic on recently purchased land where a new Field Office and Service Center would be located. Also in the short run, the renovation could not be allowed to overshadow the importance of maintaining continuing care for the farm worker patients. There was just no way to shut down the clinic for several weeks since we had no way to move to another location. We were not consulted by the Union leaders on details, but I accepted the decision when Margaret told us that we would work on through the construction period. This created potential risks to both the staff and patients. At times the dust inside the building was so heavy that we were walking around in a potentially lung-toxic fog. The noise and commotion created an ambience of absurdity, seeing farm workers sitting there in the waiting room in the dust and noise as if there was “no problem”.

For Is Kolman and several others on the staff it was a problem, a matter of health and safety. They demanded that the clinic be closed during the period of major construction and when they were ignored they actually set up a picket line outside and refused to work. I, and some others, didn't join the picket line, but kept working. I can't say what might have happened if we had all united and refused to work (I suspect nothing good), but I just wasn't prepared to picket the Union. What did happen was that Is left the UFW. I don't fault him or those who picketed (some of whom stayed on). I just thought we could survive this if farm workers could survive the conditions they had to endure in the fields every working day of their lives; and that we had to keep the clinic open for the workers. But the failure of leadership to consult the staff about how to effect the renovation in a way that would minimize problems and assure the best coverage for patient care was a harbinger of the events that would permanently close the Salinas clinic in October, 1978.

Because the Salinas clinic, unlike Delano, began as an operation manned by part-timers back in 1973 it had never provided the full range of coverage and services that Dan Murphy and his staff did. Margaret relates how Wren and Jane would follow pregnant women right into the hospital and post-partum, but it wasn't that way in the beginning before Jane and Wren and others were doing it. When I returned from my exhilarating experience in Delano I set my sights on and worked with Margaret to try to expand our commitment to enhanced continuity and comprehensive care in Salinas so that it might match Delano. I joined the staff at Natividad Hospital and became known in the private and public sector medical communities so that we would have more contacts and specialists when we needed them. In my files I have a letter I wrote to Cesar detailing a challenge we made to racist practices at Natividad Hospital by a county physician who behaved inappropriately, I thought negligently, in the care of one of our patients. I wrote letters in the local paper regarding important health related issues such as funding of the Hospital, access to care, pesticides. More than just a service center, the Salinas clinic was becoming an element in the farm workers' movement for justice. Everyone on staff was conscious of us trying to play that role, and this made the experience all the more exciting and validating for us all.

Even though I saw other cracks in the UFW foundation as early as Delano in 1975, for a while I could believe that the closing of the Sanger clinic was only an unfortunate perturbation in the upward growth of the NFWHG, not a sign of crises to come. Well after the Delano and Coachella clinics closed and Margaret left, a young inflexible non-medical bureaucrat arrived at the Salinas clinic, placed as administrator to dictate to staff. By now our fate was sealed.

The problem with a culture that adulates leaders is not just in the danger of uncritical obedience. That danger is real and serious enough. But the process which begins with the adherence of true believers—and this has been true of so many idealistic political movements, from the Russian revolution to the Chinese cultural revolution to Jonestown—can easily transform into a culture of social climbers whose obedience is little more than a form of self-aggrandizement. This second wave can creep right into bed with the first or even arise in the minds of true believers. As I write these words, the neo-con social climbers around George W. Bush, who are just beginning to fall to earth, present an outstanding example of that blurring of the border between idealistic enthusiasm and miasmic selfishness and self-delusion.

Closing of the Salinas Clinic

Although I spoke with Dan Murphy about what happened, I had no first hand knowledge of events surrounding the closing of the Calexico and Delano clinics. But by 1977 Cesar had the Synanon game going and was of the belief that there were cabals of conspirators, mainly communists, within the Union and volunteer staff who were dedicated to wrecking the union and bringing him down. The Synanon Game was a way to expose trouble makers who were challenging the unity he sought and either bring them into line or get rid of them. Of course there were all kinds of leftists and idealists within the movement. That wasn't any secret. And probably some of us shared our opinions more than was thought helpful. But I imagine someone was feeding Cesar specific false information to heighten the claim that much dissension to his policies and leadership could be traced to specific conspiracies to weaken the UFW.

It is not difficult to create such an illusionary web from facts mixed with fantasies. For example the RCP (Revolutionary Communist Party) had a campaign attacking the political fund of the Union because it was used consistently to support Democratic Party candidates even those not involved in support of farm worker efforts. I thought the RCP attack on the Fund was poorly conceived, similar to Governor Arnold Schwarzeneger's attack on the Unions in proposition 75 in the 2005 California special election. In my view their approach was an attack on the Union rather than a specific criticism of how the Fund was being used indiscriminately in behalf of the Democratic Party. The political fund is an important part of any progressive political efforts by any union, and so, I believe, should be supported enthusiastically. I think that most union members understood this distinction. I don't think the RCP made many friends with their ploy. And their influence was not of particular significance. But they and other small groups became foci of rumors of conspiracies.

By 1977, Cesar seemed to me less interested in the differing opinions that he had always sought out from workers, staff and volunteers, and more worried by such minor irritants; perhaps because the Union's path forward was unclear and because significant voices of discontent had also arisen among farm workers themselves. This was not the same man I had heard interacting informally with farm workers in Lamont only 4 years previous. As a result, a broad purge began and anyone who criticized the surprising practices then being implemented would inevitably fall, in Nixonian-McCarthy fashion, onto the enemies list. The stigma of having been labeled, reminding me of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, may still contribute to the reluctance of many former volunteers, even today, to write and speak frankly about that period.

My last day as a UFW staff member, October 5, 1978, I was called, without advance notice, before a meeting of Union members at the Union Hall in Salinas. I had patients/friends on various Ranch committees who would later confirm that word of this meeting did not go through the ranch committees, many of which were not informed. I was publicly accused of being a member of the RCP (which was untrue) as well as with trying to wreck the UFW. By then the Union leadership had already shut down all the other clinics.

Why? As Medical Director of the Salinas clinic I was a member of a clinic staff majority (I think there were one or two who disagreed) that had decided to draw a definite line we would not

cross. That line divided our consciences, values, medical ethics and support for the UFW and La Causa from destructive practices we were told we had to carry out. The issue was not something as limited as the birth control issue. We had told Cesar we would not agree to cast out from the Clinic roles hundreds or thousands of patients, loyal to the UFW and Cesar, just because they were not currently working under Union contracts, no matter the reason. The UFW supporters at ranches without contracts were, in fact, the most in need of our care, and the most vulnerable to medical problems and most unable to obtain healthcare. They were many of our most long standing and loyal patients. For when the clinic opened there were no contracts. And these workers had put their trust in us as representatives of the Union for over 5 years.

To prevent a public discussion of the dangers to the Union of shutting out many of our regular patients, Union leadership created a different discussion, inviting me alone from the clinic staff and populating the hall with friends, without notifying all the ranch committees.

The preface to closing of the Salinas Clinic was the closing of the Rodrigo Terronez clinic in Delano in 1977. I have earlier written of my experience that Dan Murphy was one of the most loyal people to Cesar of those I had met. But in 1977, bureaucratic control over and interference with the Delano clinic was now wreaking havoc with that wonderful experiment. Dan, usually going along with whatever he was ordered to do, had worked too hard not to raise his voice against these practices. I am sure he did it in a sensitive way, but that wouldn't have mattered by then. He was now a "dissenter" in a "dissent-free" environment. What is clear is that without Dan Murphy there would be no Delano Clinic (past or future) and if Dan was being forced to resign it meant that Cesar had decided that the entire NFWHG was dispensable. Delano was the Flagship. I didn't believe it when I heard that Delano and Calexico clinics had been closed in 1977. Salinas was now the last clinic left; an irony because I had by then written many critical letters to Cesar and the Board about a number of very broad political issues such as the decision to attack Tony Orendain when he refused to go back to the boycott and instead went back to organize farm workers in Texas, and the turning in of undocumented workers.

Even with Dan's resignation, my oath to myself was that I would not quit. I was going to stay with the Union as long as I could without compromising my own beliefs in the practice of medicine. I did stay, as long as I could, until Cesar--I presume with the approval of the Board of Directors majority--decided to throw out the patients not under contract. We refused and Cesar had me fired, providing a reason, transparent though it was, to close the last clinic.

Is the Background to these Events Coherent?

At the Fresno Convention of 1977, Cesar had already inflamed some tensions with Phillip Vera Cruz and the Philippino community when he had visited the Dictator Marcos in Manila and then had one of Marcos' representatives as an honored guest on the Dais. (Who advised Cesar in these decisions?). I think it was at the next Convention, which I did not attend, that a group of about 50 elected Ranch Committee representatives tried to present a nominating petition from the floor for a slate of candidate to oppose Cesar's on the Board. This was precedent setting. Some say they had no support in this effort, but we'll never know. The Union leadership clearly overreacted to this challenge. The 50 elected representatives from various ranches were expelled from the Union. To compound matters, Union staff ultimately colluded with the Growers and let

the growers know that the UFW would not challenge the firings of these workers if they weren't let back into field work³. This led to a law suit from fired workers against the Union and in the coup de grace the UFW countersued (in SLAP suit fashion) for millions against these now unemployed farm workers. This series of events seems unimaginable. Perhaps that is why we hear so little analysis of how this might have happened, even today.

To understand such terrible events probably requires looking further back in time to other mistakes and problems. Already at the moment I decided to join the full time staff, and unbeknownst to me and many UFW members and supporters, Union leadership was directing field office staff to collaborate with the Migra (the INS) in the deportation of undocumented farm workers. The rationale was that these workers could be intimidated by ranchers to vote against the Union under threat of being turned in to immigration. I don't know how long this terrible practice went on, and I don't know if it was ever written down, but Dolores, Marshall and other Board Members still living should be challenged on how it happened and why they allowed it to go on.⁴

Gilbert Padilla, in his essay, writes fondly of his work with Tony Orendain, one of the founders of the UFW, of Pancho Botello, a great organizer, and others. Gilbert hints at some of the tensions that arose here and there in developing and effecting UFW policy. Looking at the UFW in the context of other important movements--the Civil Rights Movement for example—I realized that such movements are required to function like armies at war. Voluntary discipline, but discipline of the highest order, is required when you are fighting powerful forces and all you have is your numbers, your organization and your will. For example, it took Cesar's incredibly strong will and leadership to impose the strict practice of non-violence on the members and staff. This in turn made it possible to keep the focus on the growers and neutralize the threat of police violence and State intervention in many of the communities where strikes and boycotts nevertheless became very militant. That unity worked.

Within the leadership circles of such movements, like the UFW, there are inevitable battles in planning the best course of action to advance the cause. How a leadership core learns to collectivize its decision-making process for key decisions and in response to crises is determinant in the future successes and failures of that movement as a whole.

In the UFW there were a number of brilliant and decisive farm worker leaders. Tony Orendain was one of them. Often leaders divide into those who decide to simply ratify the views of the central leader unconditionally and those who assert their own personal values, knowledge and experience. But here is the conundrum: if a general's decisions are misguided they may lead to great losses, even to losing a battle; but if the general's orders are not obeyed this may damage the unity of the movement which may lead to great losses, even to losing a battle.

³ In the list serve dialogue the defense of the leadership behavior in firing these workers omits the fact that the Union initiated this collaboration with the Ranchers. If my recollection serves me it was this vindictive collusion, not only the firings from Union positions, that precipitated the law suit.

⁴ Deborah Vollmer relates in the web dialogue that Philip Vera Cruz was adamantly opposed to this practice. But where was the rest of the leadership?

What is the solution to this riddle? The viable course is to encourage everyone to vigorously put forth their views until the final decision is made. If the outcome goes badly a good team of independent strong leaders will re-evaluate and recognize which views and proposals were at fault and which might have carried the day. If the discussion of different views is not carried out vigorously, the reevaluation cannot be rigorous. Obviously there is no formula for correct decisions, but only a conceptual framework for learning from positive and negative experiences. That is, sober dogged informed evaluation, a refusal to engage in hero worship or blind obedience, yet a willingness to submit to collective will and discipline.

Gilbert Padilla was a close comrade of Tony Orendain. Tony was a valuable and key UFW leader from the beginning. But Tony's words on the Texas farm workers situation, the importance of strike support and permanent organizing in Texas did not carry weight with Cesar. Cesar had decided that the UFW should not spend major resources in Texas with the battles raging in California. Tony's viewpoint and his direct experience in Texas was that the Texas workers were becoming every bit as active and militant and intent upon joining the UFW as those in California, and so had to be supported. When Tony refused to return to the urban boycott, insisting that the Texas work was reaching a critical juncture, Cesar, instead of looking for some middle path, to support Tony but not spent much UFW resources, in an arbitrary exercise of the power he held as President, expelled Tony from the union.

Gilbert was soon assigned to go to Texas and seize the Office that Tony had established for his UFW work and return it to a couple of UFW volunteers who were sent to Texas to counter Tony's independent efforts. When Tony opened a new office and began the Texas Farm Workers' Union he did so only because he was no longer allowed to represent La Union. Why did UFW continue to disrupt his efforts which were in no way intended to be against the UFW? Tony Orendain, a key organizer and leader from the UFW core and Gilbert Padilla with a similar mantle were forced to confront each other in this way, though neither could see any rational purpose in this confrontation.

What was going on inside the Board of Directors during this tussle? Did some people dissent? Did they stand up to be counted? Was conformity in such decisions a problem with roots going back into the 60s? The Board of Directors were the people with the leadership responsibilities, abilities and sophistication to realize that only collective leadership can keep each individual leader honest and humble. If a group validates the infallibility of a supreme leader just because he has made many outstanding decisions, what leader will not come to believe in the mantle of infallibility and act accordingly? Cesar's charisma and successes were awesome. But did an awestruck Board of Directors contribute to his believing too much in the mystique of his own perfection?

An ending of sorts

I have conflicted feelings about my history with the UFW. I always tried to be honest with leadership about things that were going on, then as well as now. I did write to the Board of Directors criticizing their attack on the ongoing Texas work, begun and continued by Orendain. I did write to the Board criticizing the Union's collusion with the Migra. I am thankful that leadership allowed me to continue to work for la causa. As Medical Director in Salinas I also

did offer detailed organizational suggestions and support for the development of a permanent NFWHG. I believe I played a role in some reforms that made our Salinas efforts more effective and coherent. I believed then that I could do much more and asked to be allowed to make things happen in the NFWHG clinical/ health realm.

Like Kathy and others, I put my life on the line for a cause and movement I believed in dearly. But because of the way I separated from the Union, I tended to suppress a lot of my wonderful personal memories and experiences, dwelling more on the sad final political events. How could I not remember the final confrontation with Cesar's hand, Frank Ortiz, in Salinas (which occurred after Cesar himself failed to achieve a confrontation with our clinic staff at a meeting when he called us to La Paz, closing the clinic for 3 days during the summer of '78).

I always remembered that I had brought on the final conflict--even though there seemed no way around it. Not only had we refused to expel thousands of non-contract patients but I had told many patients about the controversy and (with their approval) accumulated the names and phone numbers of many ranch committee members in the valley from our patients. I was hoping that when a confrontation occurred over this decision, we might be able to bring out more farm workers against this plan than the field office could bring in support of it; and even change the decision. The field office or Rick, the clinic bureaucrat, may have gotten wind of this plan, or not. But Cesar was a brilliant tactician in any case, and my thoughts that we could prevail were unrealistic in that context. The way the final event was scripted pre-empted any possible open discussion of whether it made sense to expel large numbers of patients from the clinic.

When I heard that Leroy Chatfield was going to post this web site with staff/ volunteer essays, initially I decided not to participate; why stir up things that no one wants to know or hear. I didn't want to participate because I felt that my critical eye didn't belong amidst the forever uplifting mystique of a Disneyland UFW and the heroic Cesar Chavez mythology. But when Leroy announced that all the essays were posted on line I went to see what people had written. I saw the essays of people I had toiled with and highly respected, people who had treated me kindly and fairly, despite my own failings; saw them still trying (appropriately) to validate the incredibly great efforts and accomplishments that took place under the UFW mantle. I felt a renewed kinship and, yes, as well I also detected a cautious effort at self-reflection; an attempt to surface some understanding of the problems and underlying fault lines that weakened our movement, the farm workers movement, the movement of La Raza and of the Philippino farm workers in the hey day of the UFW. This cautious honesty I sensed in the essays of Gilbert, Margaret, Kathy and Dan was, for me, inspiring. It motivated me to contribute my own story—less cautiously, but hopefully just as honestly. Writing it has helped me grapple with some of my buried feelings. I hope it serves the reader as well. Like everyone, I honor the memory of Cesar Chavez, a great leader, whose achievements were astounding. His frailty, as well as his achievements, were part of his greatness and his being. But as there are always errors along the road to achieving justice, those errors we lived were not his alone. We all share the burdens of the past and the responsibility to learn how to do better in the future.